

Humane Education

For a Peaceful and Sustainable World

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Imagine yourself walking into your classroom one Monday morning and telling your students about your new friend who's on a fact-finding mission. She (or he) has been traveling around the world—well, universe, actually—asking how she's supposed to behave in each culture. On her planet, all beings

are treated equally, with respect and compassion, and she wants to know how to act when she visits other planets. The last thing she wants to do is offend anyone, so she really needs to have accurate information. She loves to talk to young people because they tend to be more forthright than adults. And so you ask your students if they'd be willing to answer your new friend's questions (feel free to give her or him a name). The answer will likely be a somewhat suspicious, yet enthusiastic "yes."

Now comes the tricky part. Those of you who love acting might explain that your friend is from a galaxy so far away that she has to travel in an energy form, so you will close your eyes and allow her to enter your body. Those for whom this essay is rapidly degenerating into the you've-got-to-be-kidding category of teacher enrichment, might leave the classroom and come back wearing a mask. Either way, you've become the quizzical alien.

Now it's time to ask your students questions, such as:

How are you supposed to treat other humans on your planet? Is it ever okay to harm someone? Why or why not?

How are you supposed to treat those with a different religion? With a different skin color? In a wheel chair? (Depending upon the age you might add questions about sexual orientation, political beliefs, and other more controversial issues.)

And what about other species? How are you supposed to treat dogs? Pigs? Parakeets? Warblers? Chickens? Deer? Whales?

Is it ever okay to harm animals? Under what circumstances?

By the time you're done asking these, and the follow-up questions that will inevitably arise, you may see some light bulbs appearing over the tops of your students' heads. They may never have thought about the inconsistencies between what we are taught (to treat all others with respect, and as we would wish to be treated) and what we actually do. Through your alien persona, you will have the opportunity to explore issues of racism, classism, sexism, speciesism, and our contradictory behaviours towards different groups based on nothing more than our own perceptions, rather than on any meaningful differences.

It is likely that you will have raised your students' curiosity and ignited their critical thinking abilities, key components of humane education, an educational approach that explores how we might live with compassion and respect for

prejudice or speciesism and offer your students opportunities to meet those who are victims of bigotry, or visit animals mistreated in common institutionalized settings, and in so doing awaken their reverence and respect for others so that they'll be more inclined to take responsibility for their own behaviours, attitudes and choices. You might then give them information about the kinds of choices that help stop prejudice so that they can make a difference.

Imagine teaching a unit on Food, or a semester-long course analyzing a T-shirt or a can of Coke. Your interdisciplinary courses would cover health and healthcare, environmental science, economics, business ethics, world trade, psychology, agriculture, mining, chemistry, biology, soil science, advertising, marketing, media, politics, pollution, resource depletion, biodiversity, etc. You would be connecting the dots between the most ubiquitous products of our culture and the people,

Humane education examines the many challenges facing our planet, from human oppression and animal exploitation to materialism and ecological degradation...

environment and animals whom our choices impact every day. This is humane education.

More than ever, we need our schools and our educators to teach the next generation to make connections so that they can find solutions to entrenched systems that are destructive and exploitive and create a future in which we treat each other, the earth and other species with respect. With all the problems that we face—from genocide, to oil depletion, to terrorism, to species extinction, to global climate change, to human overpopulation, to disease, to institutionalized animal cruelty, to war—I believe that there is nothing more important than giving young people the knowledge and tools, and inspiring their commitment, to become global citizens whose careers and future can set us on a new, more peaceful and sustainable course.

Sustainability and environmental education, social justice education, animal welfare education, media literacy—these are all part and parcel of humane education, which sees them as interwoven subjects that cannot be taught in isolation. When teachers are able and empowered to integrate humane education into all subject categories, and when humane educators are hired to teach humane education courses, we will have found a way to give the next generation the skills, vision, and passion to build a better future for everyone.

Humane education achieves its goals by using four elements:

1) Providing accurate information, so students understand the consequences of their decisions as consumers, citizens, and future job-holders.

2) Fostering the 3 Cs: Curiosity, Creativity, and Critical Thinking, so students can evaluate information and solve problems.

3) Instilling the 3 Rs: Reverence, Respect, and Responsibility, so students will act with kindness and integrity.

4) Offering positive choices that benefit oneself, other people, the earth, and animals, so students are able to help bring about a more humane world.

The alien activity described above offers an opportunity to provide Element 2 and can open the door to lessons and discussions in traditional subjects such as history, language arts, social studies, health, and science, as well as anthropology, current events, social justice, animal protection, environmental preservation, and much more. From this icebreaker activity, you might provide information about issues related to